

## [J. H. (Jake) Byler]

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Folklore [?]

Range-lore

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San Angelo, Texas.

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### RANGE-LORE

J. H. (Jake) Byler of [Mertzon?], Texas, came from Washington County, Arkansas, to Collin County, Texas, at the age of sixteen. The family traveled in covered wagons, camped out at night, cooked on an open fire, and lay awake nights watching for Indians.

"My first real work," related Mr. Byler, "was on the Coughlin Ranch in Collin County. I ran cattle all over West Texas, from Tom Green to the Pecos and from there to New Mexico.

"The worst stampede I ever witnessed was near Buffalo Gap. I was helping John Rybran drive some Half Circle Six Cattle. C12 - Texas 2 The boss was over on first guard smoking Bull Durham in his pipe and rode off behind some bushes to strike a match and light his pipe. A strong wind was blowing from the south and just as his horse breasted an old stray yearling to keep him in the herd, he stopped so suddenly that it jarred the fire out of his pipe and that south wind whipped the sparks right over into the herd. They were gone! A new boy, who was sleeping under the wagon, jumped up, bumped his head on the wagon and made for a near-by sapling. Another puncher started up after him and he yelled. 'Don't come up here, we'll both bend this little thing down.' The fellow made for the next nearest

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bush and we made for the cattle. I tell you we had to be up and coming to even keep near them. They certainly were exactly right to be scared to death by those sparks. They were just old wild longhorns fresh off the range and we had some time getting them stopped. Then when we had stopped them once they made a second break and ran all night long. There wasn't a dry thread on any of us and our horses were given out next morning when we finally got them stopped. I felt like I never wanted to see another cow so I turned in my time and quit. Being young and naturally adventurous I decided to go to New Mexico. When I got there I joined up with the Case outfit. It was there that my horse was stolen by the Indians. We had brought all our horses into an adobe corral and closed the bars. 3 Several of the hands were put to sleep near these bars and well loaded guns lay by their sides. Imagine our horror next morning to awaken and find our stock gone. They certainly were quiet and sneaky with their dirty work. Not a man was roused as they slipped up, let down the bars and stole three horses and three mules.

"All adobe buildings were constructed with fine pole foundations. Otherwise, the Indians would take rawhide ropes and quietly saw into them at the corners.

"We started out after our horses on foot and had gone about three miles when we came upon signs of their first stop. They had killed a burro and broiled pieces of him, hide and all, for food. We trailed them on as long as we could see the tracks and camped. The next day brought victory. We overtook them and found seven in the crowd; seven of them and three of us. We had two guns each and were ready to let them have it. The boss said, 'Now here's where I get an Indian scalp.' They saw us about the time we saw them and began to dodge from one tree to another. We didn't shoot because the horses were hidden away somewhere and we hoped to find them more quickly through live Indians than dead ones. They made no attempt to fight and appeared to be unarmed.

"One of the boys and I branched off to ourselves and I struck my horse's trail. I knew it at once because of a marked hoof. The others joined us and we trailed the horses up to a big canyon where we saw 4 moccasin tracks and leaped down the canyon a ways before we

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saw the horses hobbled with a rawhide rope. A Mexican was tied to a bush with the end of the same rope. We decided to report to the Government Agency on the Indian Reservation for the horses. They assured us that they would be returned, and they were. The soldiers sent the three horses back to us by the Indians, with a message that they would try to find and return the mules. After a few days we received a letter saying that they had the mules and for us to come and get them. They were putting forth every effort to civilize those red devils but were making little head way.

“A dangerous Indian, known as old Victor, broke out of the reservation. He was an old Apache with the wildest instincts. He stole several horses and murdered a poor old freighter as he was pulling a wagon up a mountain, took his groceries and mules and made his way to some other Indians. They worked their way into a deep gorge, where the soldiers had a hard time finding them but finally got near enough to shoot several Indians and recover the mules.

“My feet began to itch again and I decided to try Arizona. I got a recommendation to run a ranch out there and started but ran upon Coughlin again. He had another big ranch and the Government Agency to furnish beef for the Indian Reservation. He got to talkin' to me about what I would get into out there, outlaws, Indians etc., 5 and asked me to stop and work with him, which I did. He found out later that he was buying stolen stuff for the reservation. A new hand knew better than to ask questions. If he had any sense at all he kept his mouth shut and stuck to duty. If he didn't, he didn't last long.

“Billy the Kid was doing his part of the stealing on the Pecos and selling to Coughlin. I've slept many a night right by Billy and never asked a question, just get up next morning and took the cattle he had brought in, up to the reservation without a word.

“Billy the Kid stood in with most of the stage drivers. He stole all the horses from the nearest stage stand, went on out and met the incoming stage, took the driver's gun and all the money and later divided with the driver. The stage company employed Sam Perry

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to follow them. They furnished him with the best and fastest saddle horses that could be bought and told him to pick his men. Sam was a crook too, so he came by where Tress Underwood and I were working and tried to get us to go with him. He said Billy the Kid's hide-out was on the border, that he knew where it was and that we could sell out to him and split, then get us an old pack jack, trudge back and tell that the Kid and his gang overpowered us and took everything we had. Tress and I told him we had a good job and didn't want to take any chances on losing it. He went on his way but returned some weeks 6 later, just as he had planned, leading the old jack and loaded down with money. He took us into Silver City and we all got drunk. We were eatin' at a hotel and Sam was settin' across the table from a stranger a-poppin' off and he popped once too many. The stranger, he ups and biffs him one in the face with a saucer. Sam's face was cut and the saucer demolished, so we left on that.

"We worked on there awhile and I got another wild notion to go to Old Mexico. The outlaws were so numerous along the line that the nearest town was thirty miles over. I made the town of Chihuahua alright, but my horses was stolen the first night I was there, so there I was, a-foot in a strange town with my big dirk knife in my boot leg and my 45 in my belt. I knocked around a few days and one night I decided to go out to a Mexican dance. I got in O.K., and had a pretty good time but noticed the Mexicans watching that knife all the time. I got ready to leave and looked about for a way to slip away and not be seen. A trail led off from the building and I decided that would be my best route, so I started down that dark trail. I hadn't gone far before three Mexican men closed in upon me. Two of them grabbed me on either side while the third one stood out in front of me with an old axe. The handle of my gun was stickin' out on my right side and one of them made a grab for that. I was fighting right and left and we had 7 it around and around. I knocked them back so fast with my fist and elbows that the old man with the axe never did get to me. When I gained sufficient distance to pull my gun, I whacked the nearest one over the head and out he went. On came the second one and, I let him have it. The old man with the axe ran, or thought he did. He didn't run at all, compared with my speed. I tell 'em all yet, that I could

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have been fined for speedin' that night and I never stopped to see if my brakes was a workin'. I was just a little quicker motioned than they were was all that saved me but in the round they got the knife. Next day I went down to a saloon to look around a little, thought maybe I'd find some means of locating my knife. I didn't feel afraid but I know now that was just plain lack of sense and because I was such a kid I couldn't realize the danger I was in. If they had put me in jail there I never would have gotten out, in that strange country.

“An old Mexican woman came to the door and asked me to come in. I shook my head and she said, 'Knife?' I nodded and said, 'Is my knife here?' 'Fool Mexicans drunk last night, took knife, I got it,' she replied in broken English. She went back and returned with my knife and I was very pleased to have it back. One big “greaser” stepped up to me and offered me 5¢ apiece for my cartridges, and a horse and saddle for my gun. I was tempted to trade 8 but the old woman told me not to. She told me that I had better get out of there if I wanted to get out alive. She said there was only one other white man in the whole town and for me to go to him and have him prepare the usual food for the trip out, which was a half gallon of parched corn ground into meal on some kind of a metal outfit, and a paloncy. A paloncy was a ball of brown sugar. I did as I was told and the white man put the meal, the paloncy and a tin cup in a little sack and handed them to me. The old woman said if I had traded my gun for the horse that they would have followed me out, murdered me and taken the horse back. She said for me to wait until dark to leave. I never felt more desolate in all my life than the night I walked out of there. I could see horse tracks on the trail in the moonlight and I didn't know but what they had ridden out ahead of me to kill me; but I knew I'd rather be killed than go back, so I just pulled my 45 and kept going. I was not molested though and made the line that night; a distance of about thirty miles. I certainly was worn out when I got there. Two white men with three good horses overtook me there and when I asked them where they were going they said, 'Silver City.' I offered to pay them to let me ride their spare horse but they said that was their pack horse and they were afraid he would give out, so they rode off and left me there on the line a-foot. Again I 9 felt very lonely and desolate and thought if I ever got back to civilization I wouldn't want to

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ever sow any more wild oats. I picked out a nice quiet spot in some high grass, ate some of my food and lay down and slept a good nap. As night came on I made ready to take off again. I didn't do so well that night, as I was tired and sore and not driven on by fright as I was the night before. The next day was about the same. I didn't sleep much but traveled very little and reached a mining camp about sun-down. Two men were just leaving out for Silver City in an old rickety buggy. Again I offered to pay for a ride but was told that the buggy might break down and again I was left behind. It wasn't so bad this time, though, as the mining boss told me to stick around and he would give me all the odd jobs he could. I stayed around and worked four or five days and one day a prospector came riding into camps on a pretty little pink mare and leading his pack jack. He told me he was going to Silver City and I hit him up for a ride. He said O.K. I could ride 'til the jack gave out and then walk awhile. This was what I did and it beat walkin' all the way, too bad. I had \$5.00 when we got to Silver City and my ride paid for too, and thought I was pretty lucky.

"I got a good job with another outfit and got along fine from then on.

"When a green horn would come into camps the older boys had various forms of torment for them. One was to 10 "leg 'em" (spank them with leggings). Others were a dry shave or head shave just as the offense merited and still another was to get them to go to sleep under the wagon, then frighten them so they would jump up and bump their heads. Getting them on wild horses was also a favorite joke.

"When we had strangers at the round-ups for chuck the boss would say, 'Now you gentlemen had better get up on the wagon and hold, I'm a-gona turn these S——B's loose on this.' On one occasion a couple of Englishmen crept shyly upon the wagon with their eyes a stickin' out on stems.

"I came back to Texas and married a cowgirl. She was as good help with our little herd as any hand I ever had. She rode a special built sidesaddle which cost \$50.00. Once when she had tailed down an old yearling for me to brand, I saw he was about to get up, so I

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jumped a-straddle of his back and happened to land backwards. He jumped up with me and away we went. I made a grab or two and finally got hold of his tail and rode home, cowboy. My wife laughed at me 'til I was as mad as most husbands when their wives laugh at them.

"I was out around Sterling City once with a herd and a bad storm came up. It was as dark as pitch. The usual stampede took place. M. B. "Nub" Pulliam was riding a good horse and an old wild longhorn lunged into his 11 horse and knocked him down. "Nub" jumped off and fell to his knees right in among that raging herd. He was trying to run on his hands and knees when it lightened and Wash Tankersley saw him. Wash stuck spurs to his horse, forged through those maddened cattle and hollered 'Jump on, Nub.' Nub made a wild grab and scrambled on behind him. He was so excited and afraid they would be knocked off again, that he got Wash by the ears and nearly pulled them off before they reached safety.

"Wash was the best roper I ever saw and the smoothest man in a herd. He could out-run any cow with any average horse and manage cattle with a skill that was fascinating.

"I remember once we bought an old wild longhorn from Gus Thomas and were going to kill her. She was the meanest cow I ever saw. We thought we were going to have to knock her in the head to kill her. We even had to climb a tree to rope her and then she would buck out of the loop some how. After several attempts to kill her were made with a pistol we wrapped a six-shooter ball in a rag, put it in a shot gun and killed her.

"Some of the cattle bosses were too hard on the sheep men. Often we were told to tear up and burn their camps and whip the herders with our quirts. Some two-bit punchers did that but no first class cowboys were guilty. The cow man resented the sheep man more because his buying, 12 leasing, and fencing land forced the cowman to do the same and consequently broke up his haven of free domain.

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"Yes, we sung, whistled, and hummed to the cattle so they would know where we were, also that the other guards might know our location. The constant sound prevented fright from any sudden sound, such as a horse stumbling, etc.

"Well, you know us boys could just go on talking forever about the old days, and we always like to talk to people when they are willing to listen.

"Me and mama are just settin' here now. All the kids are grown and gone. We get lonely but we enjoy the well earned comforts of our good home and are always glad to have some one to talk to." Range-lore

Elizabeth Doyle

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

J. H. Ryler, Mertzon, Texas, interviewed, November 17, 1937.